

The trend in many industries is toward equality for gay and lesbian employees and better recognition of their rights. That trend usually manifests itself first with a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and later with domestic partner benefits.

In the auto industry, however, the trend seems to have stalled a bit.

At General Motors Corp., DaimlerChrysler and Ford Motor Co., unionized gay and lesbian employees have seen a little progress, but not much else has been happening.

While some progressive policies are in place at the Big Three automakers, not one offers domestic partner benefits.

"Because the automakers aren't offering domestic partner benefits, they're a little behind the curve," says Kim Mills, education director for the Human Rights Campaign and the group's specialist on workplace issues.

No company seems to want to be first in its industry.

"We're just waiting to see who goes first," Mills says. "In order to really build brand loyalty, they should go that extra step and offer domestic partner benefits. Gay and lesbian consumers are becoming aware of the basics of what makes a gay-friendly company."

According to Mills, when companies provide domestic partner benefits, they demonstrate to gay employees that their rights are being considered. It also sends a message to gay and lesbian consumers—a market that is too big to overlook, says Allan Gilmour, a former Ford executive.

Gilmour was one of the company's highest-ranking executives when he came out a few years ago.

"Gay and lesbian people increasingly want domestic partner benefits and look at them as an indication of a company's commitment to gay and lesbian issues," he says. "No company selling to consumers can afford to neglect this big market."

The most recent sign of progress in the auto industry came in the form of a four-year contract signed last fall between each of the Big Three



Despite union victories in Canada, top automakers' U.S. employees aren't in the fast lane toward domestic partner benefits by Gip Plaster

and the United Auto Workers union that, for the first time, protects the companies' unionized lesbian and gay employees from discrimination.

Nondiscrimination protections were already in place at all three companies. However, the contract adds the support of the UAW, opening the grievance and arbitration process to unionized employees alleging unfair treatment based on sexual orientation.

As part of the package, the Big Three also agreed to study the impact of offering domestic partner benefits to UAW employees.

Some autoworkers in Canada already have benefits that came either directly or indirectly from union efforts.

One gay and lesbian activist within the auto industry says she considers the union contract important, but another says it does not go far enough.

"I think it's a big deal. I think the contract needs to cover nondiscrimination," assesses Michelle Walters, co-chair of DaimlerChrysler's gay and lesbian employee group, People of Diversity. "It now gives union members additional protections."

Walters adds that her group was in favor of the contract changes.

The merger of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler slowed down progress at her company, she says, because much energy was focused on combining

the companies' operations. Now, things are back on track and she expects more progress.

Walters surmises that if the union can make strides on behalf of gay men and lesbians, the effect will probably be felt eventually by all company employees.

"Historically, that's the way it works. If the union negotiates a benefit, it translates to salaried workers," she explains.

But Alice McKeague of Ford's gay and lesbian group, GLOBE, says the UAW could have done much more.

She says many of the harassment complaints that come to GLOBE are from hourly workers who are members of the UAW.

"I think the UAW could do a much better job protecting gay and lesbian employees than they do," she says. "I would classify this as a small step forward, and that's part of my disappointment. We were hoping for a bigger step."

McKeague is displeased that U.S. workers do not have the same access to domestic partner benefits as those in Canada.

"We were hoping that the UAW would be a little more forceful in asking that domestic partner benefits be a part of the contract," she says. "The UAW says it bargains for families, but it doesn't bargain for gay and lesbian families."

The good news in the auto industry is that, in addition to the gay and lesbian employee

groups at Ford and DaimlerChrysler, one also exists at General Motors, meaning that someone is watching out for the interests of gay and lesbian employees across the Big Three.

There is more good news, too. All three companies include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies.

Not one of them, however, offers domestic partner benefits.

General Motors, the No. 1 carmaker in the world, makes many popular brands, including Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, GMC, Oldsmobile, Pontiac and the "we like being different" brand, Saturn. It also produces cars for some foreign companies, including Isuzu and Saab.

The company, which makes about a third of its sales outside the United States, operates more than 100 facilities worldwide.

General Motors offers domestic partner benefits to Canadian workers, and some see that as a step toward getting the same for U.S. workers.

As for when benefits could be available in the States, company spokeswoman Marcia McGee says: "We're looking at other companies that offer them. It's being researched right now."

According to McGee, the company discusses gay and lesbian issues in its diversity training.

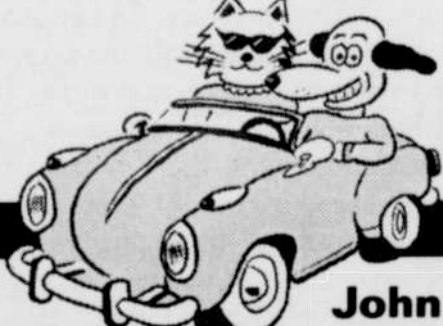
Ford Motor Company makes more trucks than any other company and is the No. 2 automaker overall. In addition to Ford, its brands include Aston Martin, Jaguar, Lincoln, Mercury and Volvo. It also has a controlling interest in the Japanese maker Mazda.

Ford owns most of the No. 1 rental company, Hertz, and Ford's subsidiary Ford Motor Credit is the top auto finance company.

Ford also discusses gay and lesbian issues in its diversity training, a standard four-hour program that has reached most employees.

No. 3 automaker DaimlerChrysler was formed in 1998 when Daimler-Benz, maker of the Mercedes Benz, paid \$37 million for Chrysler, known for its minivans. The German-owned company also produces brands that include Dodge, Eagle, Jeep and Plymouth.

Spokeswoman Megan Giles says the company does not discuss gay and lesbian issues in its diversity training.



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